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THIS PHOTO provided by the journal Science shows a honeybee carrying a parasitic varroa mite.

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New suspect in honeybee deaths

Experts: Surveys of failed colonies show traces of same paralysis virus

WASHINGTON (AP) — Scientists have a new suspect for a mysterious affliction that has killed off honeybees by the billions: a virus previously unknown in the U.S.

The scientists report using a novel genetic technique and old-fashioned statistics to identify Israeli acute paralysis virus as a potential culprit in the deaths of worker bees, a phenomenon known as colony collapse disorder.

Next up are attempts to infect the bees with the virus to see whether it is a killer.

"At least we have a lead now we can begin to follow. We can use it as a marker and we can use it to investigate whether it does in fact cause disease," said Dr. W. Ian Lipkin, a Columbia University epidemiologist and co-author of the study. Details appear this week in Science Express, the online edition of the journal Science.

Experts said mites, pesticides and poor nutrition remain suspects, as does the stress of travel. Beekeepers shuffle bees across the nation so the bees can pollinate crops as they come into bloom, contributing about \$15 billion a year to agriculture.

The newfound virus may prove to have added nothing

more than insult to the injuries bees suffer, several experts said.

"This may be a piece or a couple of pieces of the puzzle, but I certainly don't think it is the whole thing," said Jerry Hayes, chief of the apiary section of Florida's Agriculture Department.

STILL, SURVEYS of honeybees from decimated colonies turned up traces of the virus almost every time. Bees untouched by the phenomenon were virtually free of it.

"The authors themselves recognize it's not a slam dunk, it's correlative. But it's certainly more than a smoking gun — more like a smoking arsenal. It's very compelling," said May Berenbaum, a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign entomologist who led a study of the decline in honeybee populations.

For Berenbaum and others, colony collapse disorder is only the latest devastating problem to beset bees.

"Even if we were to solve this CCD thing tomorrow ... we would still be in a crisis situation because we have these other problems," said Nicholas Calderone, an entomologist at Cornell University.

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Beekeepers fear sting of imported Australian hives

By **GARANCE BURKE**
Associated Press

ATWATER, Calif. — Beekeepers who are battling a mysterious ailment that led to the disappearance of millions of honeybees now fear the sting of imported Australian bees that they worry could outcompete their hives and might carry a deadly parasite unseen in the United States.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has allowed shipments of Australian bees to resume despite concerns by some of its own scientists.

Australia had been air-freighting the insects across the Pacific for four years to replace hives devastated by the perplexing colony collapse disorder. But six weeks ago the Australian government abruptly stopped the shipments, saying it could no longer be certain the country was free of a smaller, aggressive bee that has infested areas near

the Great Barrier Reef, U.S. officials said.

The USDA decided to permit the bee shipments to resume with some precautions, and the first plane loads arrived in San Francisco earlier this month.

Beekeeper Ken Haff of Mandan, N.D., says he fears the foreign hives could kill off his apiary.

"We've got enough problems with our own bee diseases that we don't know how to treat, and they open the border to a whole new species that could carry God knows what," said Haff, a vice president of the American Honey Producers Association. "That's a total slap in the face for us."

Shad Sullivan, a bee wholesaler in California's Central Valley, said that in the four years he has imported bees from Australia, he has found that the hearty imports outlive domestic bees that have been weakened by pesticides, pests and diseases.

"If the bees were truly carrying something that bad, I would have been the first to get it," Sullivan said as a thick cloud of the buzzing insects flew overhead. "I just haven't seen those kinds of devastation."

Domestic honeybees feed on most flowering plants, and are vital pollinators for many food crops.

However, domestic bee stocks have been waning since 2004, when scientists first got reports of the puzzling illness that has claimed up to 90 percent of commercial hives and has been labeled colony collapse disorder.

That's also the year the USDA allowed imports of Australian hives, and scientists have been investigating whether Australia was a source of a virus tied to the bee die-off.

Entomologists also fear that the aggressive bee species found near Australia's Great Barrier Reef could carry a deadly mite,

said Jeff Pettis, the USDA's top bee scientist.

"This could be a threat worldwide, because if those bees are moving around the chances are this mite would move with it," Pettis said. "We just don't need another species causing problems."

The Australian government has adopted emergency controls to quarantine and destroy the aggressive bees and has never detected that mite, according to materials provided by Chelsey Martin, counselor for public affairs at the Australian Embassy in Washington.

U.S. agriculture officials say they also are taking precautions.

Agricultural officials started sampling Australian bees this month after they were released in the Central Valley.